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SERIES VIII

NEAR EASTERN MINIATURES

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Although mural painting was practised in the Near East under Islamic rule, painting in general was in the form of book illustrations or, from about the beginning of the sixteenth century, in that of single sheet miniatures, usually kept in albums. They were painted in tempera on specially prepared paper. The high estimation in which calligraphy was held, supplemented by a racial indifference toward realistic representation, led almost exclusively to two-dimensional composition, with an arbitrary selection of colors and a complete absence of shadows. The shape of the space left for illustration was usually determined by the caprice of the calligraphist.

Among the earliest Islamic miniatures which have come down to us, dating from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, are illustrations from Arabic translations of Greek manuscripts on medicine and from the popular discourses of Hariri. The designs are bold and vigorous and the colors clear and bright, dependent upon the traditions of Christian and Sasanian painting in Mesopotamia.

The most significant development of miniature painting in the Near East was in Persia. To the style of Mesopotamia, widely spread through Persia by the religious teacher Mani, were added Chinese influences through the conquests of the Mongol Il-khans (1256-1353), whose summer residence was Tabriz. The Persian-Mongolian style is best exemplified in a famous manuscript of the Jami at-Tawarikh dated 710 A.H. (A.D. 1310-1311), in which the drawing is strongly Chinese, with a pronounced subordination of color to line. The other, more purely Mesopotamian, style is shown in number 1, where the emphasis is upon color and formal design.

Under the dynasty founded by Timur (Tamerlane) (1369-1500), with capitals at Samarkand and Herat, there developed a style, commonly referred to as Timurid, characterized by graceful line and charming color, more naturalistic representation of landscape, and greater realism and variety in facial expression, as shown in number 2. At the same time were produced charming ink drawings, occasionally with gold decoration. The greatest painter of this period was Bihzad, whose name became a synonym for the perfect painter.

With the re-unification of Persia under the Safavid shahs (1502-1736), whose successive capitals were Tabriz, Kazwin, and Isfahan, miniature painting attained its zenith. To the qualities inherited from the school of Herat was added a genius for subtly balanced design, which also distinguishes the magnificent Persian carpets and textiles of the sixteenth century. Under the dependent dynasty of the Shaibanids, with their capital at Bokhara, there developed in the sixteenth century a school of painting of which number 5 is a typical example. In the seventeenth century European influence, together with changes in taste and diminishing patronage, brought about the gradual degeneration of native painting.

The Persian miniature style brought to Turkey by the Ottoman sultans (1300-1924) was transformed through contact with European art and artists at the court in Constantinople.

From the first five rulers (1526-1659) of the Mughal dynasty in India miniature painting received generous patronage. The Persian style introduced by the Mohammedan conquerors developed in the direction of realism. In the second half of the seventeenth century the school began to decline through the loss of royal patronage.

1. MINIATURE PAINTING FROM A SHAH-NAMAH OR "BOOK OF KINGS" BY FIRDAUSI. SUBJECT: RUSTAM CAPTURING HIS FAMOUS HORSE, RAKSH. PERSIAN, BEGINNING OF THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY

Size, 7¾ by 7⅝ in. In the absence of modeling and perspective effects, this miniature is characteristic of Near Eastern painting in general. A trace of the Bagdad tradition is apparent in the simplicity and boldness of the design, in the rich, full coloring, and in the use of gold for the sky. The influence of the Mongolian rulers of Persia at this time is seen in the round faces and almond eyes, and in the type of hat worn by Rustam.

2. MINIATURE PAINTING. SUBJECT: DERVISHES DANCING. PERSIAN, SCHOOL OF BIHZAD, END OF THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY

Size, 11¾ by 7⅜ in. Characteristic of the school of Bihzad are the relatively naturalistic treatment of the landscape background, the variety and realism in the facial types, the wide range of color, and the emphasis on graceful, rhythmic lines. Elaborately decorated borders, such as the one surrounding this miniature, were a late fifteenth-century innovation which long enjoyed popularity.

3. MINIATURE PAINTING FROM A BUSTAN BY SADI. SUBJECT: KING DARIUS AND THE HERDSMAN. PERSIAN, ATTRIBUTED TO SHAIKH-ZADAH MAHMUD, EARLY SIXTEENTH CENTURY

Size, 5⅛ by 8⅞ in. The king, becoming separated from his suite, saw a herdsman running towards him and, assuming him to be an enemy, prepared to draw his bow. Thereupon, the herdsman cried, "I am no enemy; seek not to kill me." The king smiled and said, "Heaven has befriended thee."

"It shows neither wise administration nor good judgment," replied the herdsman, "when the king knows not an enemy from a friend. Many times hast thou seen me in thy presence and asked me concerning the horses. Now I come again before thee and thou takest me for an enemy. . . . Tend thou thy people as I, with sense and judgment, tend my horses." This miniature is a masterly example of the golden age of Persian painting, and shows complete technical facility and perfect understanding of the art of decorative composition in color, line, and mass.

4. MINIATURE PAINTING FROM A KHAMSAH BY NIZAMI. SUBJECT: LAILA AND MAJNUN IN LOVE AT SCHOOL. PERSIAN, ABOUT 1525 (THE DATE OF THE MS.)

Size, 4⅝ by 8⅜ in. The Persian inscription high upon the wall behind the figures reads, "O teacher, give no instruction of an unjust kind to that fairy-faced girl, Laila, nor anything but good; for nothing else is worthy of that beauteous face." The story of Laila and Majnun — one of the classics of Persian literature — relates a tragic history of thwarted love. The elaborate background and accessories bespeak the luxury and graciousness of Persian court life under Tahmasp I (1524-1576). The perfection of composition, the richness and variety of color are characteristic of Persian miniature painting at its best.

5. MINIATURE PAINTING. SUBJECT: GENRE SCENE. PERSIAN, SCHOOL OF BOKHARA, END OF THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

Size, 5 by 7 in. A flourishing school of painting developed in Bokhara in the sixteenth century under the Shaibanid dynasty (1428-1599). The first painters were brought from Herat, where they had been trained in the style of Bihzad. The interest in graceful line is still pronounced, although the representation of individualized facial types has disappeared. The head covering of the man is the huge, drooping turban common in paintings of the Bokhara school.

6. MINIATURE PAINTING FROM THE DASTAN-I-AMIR-HAMZAH, OR ROMANCE OF AMIR-HAMZAH. SUBJECT: THE SPY, ZUNBUR, BRINGS MAHIYYA TO THE CITY, WHERE THEY MEET A SICK WOMAN ON HER WAY TO A CHEMIST. INDIAN, MUGHAL SCHOOL, ABOUT 1550-1575

Size, 22½ by 29⅛ in. This painting is one of a group painted in tempera on cloth for a copy of the romance begun for the Mughal emperor, Humayun (1530-1556), and completed under the reign of Akbar (1556-1605). The book, consisting of fourteen volumes, was illustrated by about 1400 paintings of exceptionally large size, mainly the work of two Persian painters, Abd al-Samad and Mir Sayyid Ali. The style is predominantly Persian, but its more realistic character reflects the taste of the Mughal court.

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RUSTAM CAPTURING THE HORSE RAKSH

From a Shah-namah (Book of Kings) of Firdausi

Persian, Beginning of XV Century

Series VIII, Number 1

Near Eastern Miniatures

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DERVISHES DANCING

Persian, School of Behzad
End of XV Century

Series VIII, Number 2
Near Eastern Miniatures

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KING DARIUS AND THE HERDSMAN

Probably by Shaikh-zadah Mahmud. From a Bustan of Sadi

Persian, Early XVI Century

Series VIII, Number 3

Near Eastern Miniatures

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LAILA AND MAJNUN IN LOVE AT SCHOOL

From a Khamsah of Nizami, dated 1525

Persian

Series VIII, Number 4

Near Eastern Miniatures

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GENRE SCENE

Persian, Bokhara School
End of XVI Century

Series VIII, Number 5
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AYAR BRINGS MAHIYA INTO TOWN

Illustration from the Romance of Amir Hamzah

Indian, Mughal; Period of Akbar
Second Half of XVI Century

Series VIII, Number 6
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